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SENATE NATURAL RESOURCES

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■ Tribune editorial

## Pull plug on future cyanide gold mines

Mining has a long and colorful history in Montana. For many years it was the backbone of the state's economy.

The industry still has a place in Montana. But the state has changed and so must mining.

There's an increasing realization that wide-open skies, crystal-clear water and intact mountains are among the many qualities that make the state special.

Open-pit mines that use cyanide to leach gold and silver from ore are a threat to those qualities.

Initiative 137 would ban the use of cyanide at new or expanded open-pit mines in the state.

Supporters see it as the best way to prevent costly and possibly irreparable harm to the state's water and landscape. Opponents say it's unnecessary and will cost the state much-needed tax revenue and well-paying jobs.

With the average wage in Montana at the bottom of all states, there's no question of the need to develop and maintain high-paying jobs.

But the jobs should not come at the expense of the state's environment. Health and safety of Montanans and wildlife cannot be traded for some short-term employment.

Mining supporters are no doubt correct when they argue that there have been no human deaths attributed to cyanide.

But that's not the point.

There have been some five dozen cyanide spills at mines in the past 15 years. Five dozen times that, the poison has seeped into streams or groundwater or even just the mountainside.

Just last month, the state fined owners of the open-pit Kendall mine near Lewistown \$300,000. Tests showed that, over three years, cyanide and other substances from the mine polluted five different drainages. Kendall was operated by the same company that wants to develop the McDonald Mine on the Blackfoot River just east of Lincoln.

INITIATIVE  
**I-137**

There's no way to know or measure the health risks posed by such accidents.

But ranchers near Kendall have complained for years. Their livelihood, if not their health, has been threatened by the mining problems.

In spite of the continued failure of mining companies to care properly for the state's land and water, mine owners still want Montanans to trust them.

What do they do when their intentions are questioned? Just last week, three top managers of the TVX Mineral Hill Mine near Jardine were fired for criticizing the operation. They claimed the company — and the industry — were lax about environmental protections and employee safety.

Much of the gold in Montana is found in low-grade ore. The most profitable way to get at the precious metal is by ripping tons of ore from mountainsides and soaking it with poisonous cyanide.

Unfortunately, the process endangers the state's environmental quality, brutally scars the landscape and potentially puts residents at risk.

Under I-137, cyanide leaching mines now in operation would be allowed to continue. But new mines and expansions would not be allowed.

That makes sense. No one working today at a gold mine (and there aren't that many of them) will lose that job because of I-137. But until the industry can develop a safer and less destructive process, other low-grade ore bodies should be left in the ground.

Vote "yes" on I-137 to preserve Montana's environment and protect its residents.

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Monday, October 18, 2004

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Thursday, October 14, 2004

## Cyanide mining's record too bad to ignore

*By Chronicle Editor*

Mining has been a big part of Montana's history - and it will continue to be. Talc is mined profitably right here in Gallatin County. The Stillwater Mine, a very successful platinum and palladium producing operation near Nye, provides many high-paying, stable jobs for Montanans.

But Montanans approved a ballot initiative in 1998 that prohibited a certain type of mining in Montana - cyanide heap-leach mining.

On Nov. 2, voters will be asked to repeal that initiative and allow cyanide heap-leach mining to resume.

But to do so would be a mistake.

Cyanide heap-leach mining is used to extract minute traces of precious metal - usually gold - from immense amounts of rock. The extremely low-grade ore is crushed and showered with a cyanide solution that dissolves the gold from the ore so it can be concentrated.

The process creates irreclaimable scars on the landscape. And while the cyanide involved is highly poisonous, the greatest danger in the rock-crushing process stems from the release of other acids and heavy metals that can contaminate surface waters.

These are not hypothetical problems. Cyanide heap-leach mines already have contaminated waters in numerous instances around the state. In several cases, reclamation bonding required by the state was insufficient to cover the clean-up costs, leaving taxpayers with millions of dollars in bills we are still paying today.

Proponents of the cyanide-ban repeal say that the bill provides for a new level of regulation that will prevent future accidents. This is not convincing. An offer by the industry to pick up the costs of ongoing mining pollution clean-up jobs would be more convincing proof that the mining companies' long-term intentions are good.

The potential risks of pollution coupled with the certain damage to landscapes simply cannot justify the minimal benefits of limited numbers of often short-term jobs offered by this mining process.

Responsible mining will continue to be an important part of Montana's economy.  
But cyanide heap-leach mining has a record that's simply too bad to ignore.

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Opinion

## **Gazette opinion: Look at facts; don't buy I-147's political pitch**

Initiative 147 proposes that Montanans reverse their 1998 decision to outlaw new cyanide heap-leach mines. Initiative 147 is being promoted chiefly by Canyon Resources, a Colorado company that already is at impasse with the state of Montana over cleanup of its cyanide leach gold mine that ceased operations nine years ago. Canyon Resources refused to pay for the study to determine how best to accomplish that cleanup, so the state had to use taxpayer money for the necessary study.

That record doesn't inspire confidence for doing more of the same business with the same firm and the same cyanide heap-leach process.

### **No new technology**

In fact, I-147 doesn't provide for any new technologies. All of the safeguards proposed in I-147 have been used previously in cyanide leach gold mines in Montana, and all of them have failed to prevent water pollution or mine waste leakage.

Concerns about the process go beyond cyanide itself to the fact that leach processing of low-grade gold ore requires pulverizing many tons of rock to get a single ounce of gold. There's a large amount of what a state regulator recently called "environmentally complex" reclamation required.

Five cyanide heap-leach gold mines in Montana have been abandoned (including Canyon Resources' Kendall Mine), but not fully reclaimed. All are expected to need treatment of acidic water forever. Four of the mines were owned by the bankrupt Pegasus Gold. Bonds Pegasus posted won't provide the perpetual water treatment.

Canyon Resources has had its own financial problems: a lack of profitability dating back many years and a threat of being delisted this month by the American Stock Exchange for failing to file financial statements on time. (This week, the company filed the statements, announcing it lost \$6.3 million in the first half of the year.)

An analysis of the environmental protection requirements written into I-147 showed that each point has been tried and failed in Montana already. For example, I-147 provides for leach solution impoundments designed to withstand 100-year storms. Jim Kuipers, a Butte consultant hired by I-147 opponents, found that four separate storms, each greater than the 100-year storm design, have occurred at the Zortman and Landusky mines in just 25 years. As a result, leach solution overflowed impoundments and spilled into ground and surface water.

### **Fishermen vs. Canyon Resources**

Take a look at the money flowing into the battle over I-147. Two groups have formed to oppose I-147. One is Montanans for Common Sense Mining Laws, led by the Montana Environmental Information Center, which championed the cyanide leach ban back in 1998. The MEIC is the major funder of this political committee. The other I-147 opponent committee, Save the Blackfoot, lists its major contributors as Trout Unlimited chapters in Missoula and Ovando and the Clark Fork Coalition in Missoula.

On the proponents side, according to the latest reports filed, Canyon Resources alone has pumped \$2.98 million into the campaign - 10 times as much as the two opponent committees have reported raising altogether.

Initiative 147 includes a clause that would specifically benefit Canyon Resources by restoring all the mining rights it had on Nov. 3, 1998. That's the day before Montana voters banned new cyanide leach mines, blocking the company's plan for a mine near the Blackfoot River in Western Montana.

Initiative 147 is an out-of-state mining company's multimillion-dollar attempt to turn back the clock. It's time for Montanans to move forward toward more responsible use and development of natural resources. Let's not go back to the failed processes of the past.

We urge Montanans to vote against I-147.

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## Testimony on SB 306

Our family has worked four generations on the family ranch north of Lewistown, Montana. We were joined in this operation by our son and daughter-in-law after our lawsuit to mitigate the damages caused by the CR Kendall mine was settled. We felt it was safe for our children and grandchildren to grow up on this family ranch. Now this is being threatened by SB 306.

Our lawsuit followed years of our family trying to keep the mine in compliance with laws and mining permits. The lawsuit alone lasted 7 years with 2 trips to the Supreme Court. We worked diligently to promote the citizen initiatives to ban open pit cyanide mining because of the damage it caused our family, neighbors, other Montana's who live below these mines, and also the extreme cost to the Montana taxpayers to clean them up. The Zortman- Landusky, Beal Mountain, and Basin Creek Mines have all caused severe water pollution, and taxpayers are paying tens of millions in clean-up costs. Zortman Landusky has mine water treatment projected in perpetuity and at CR Kendall it has been projected to last as much as 100 years.

The CR Kendall Mine has had cyanide spills, and polluted the streams and groundwater in four drainages. Our family has been dealing with this nightmare for over 20 years. Water on our ranch was contaminated by heavy metals from the waste rock dumps and nitrates from blasting and cyanide. We were also almost totally dewatered by water treatments that amounted to nothing more than blowing contaminated water into the air to evaporate it. This continues to this day. Ultimately, we filed a civil suit against the company for damages, and we were forced to drill expensive wells to find clean water. The Kendall mine still has an operating permit. It hasn't been reclaimed and the final water management and reclamation plan hasn't been resolved. The promised EIS is on hold and the 14 million dollar bond has never been received by DEQ because the company says it isn't necessary.

Senate Bill 306 under consideration by the legislature would authorize open pit cyanide leaching as long as the cyanide processing occurs at mines that had an operating permit and were operating in 1998. This could apply to the Kendall mine even though it is out of compliance with Montana's laws.

Montanans voted to prohibit open pit cyanide leach mining in 1998 and again in 2004; this time by an even larger margin. This bill will open the door to additional cyanide leach mining, which goes against the will of the people. We have no problem if Golden Sunlight wants to accept historic tailings from abandoned mines or historic mines. But, the language in this bill goes beyond that. We think the Montana voters made it very clear how they felt on this issue.

We cannot be at the hearing today because we're in the middle of calving. We urge the committee to respect the Montana voters and vote against SB 306.

Thank you,  
Alan and Stephanie Shammel  
Hilger Montana 59451  
406-538-8686

Wednesday, September 22, 2004

# OPINION

## I-147: Enough is still enough

In 1998, the voters of Montana went to the polls and approved a ballot measure that banned new and expanded open-pit cyanide-leach mining in Montana.

This year, Montanans are again being asked to vote on cyanide-leach mining. Initiative 147 would re-establish the technique in Montana, with a variety of environmental safeguards spelled out explicitly.

Proponents of I-147 are selling the initiative as a jobs measure, claiming that high-paying mining jobs are important to Montana's economy.

But Montanans already made a decision in 1998 that jobs are less important than a clean environment. If we are going to have the benefits of these jobs, they must come about as a result of industries that are respectful of the natural resources of our state, and not just exploitive of them. This view grows out of the state's long tradition of being taken advantage of by out-of-state corporations that have made millions of dollars by extracting mineral wealth from the state and leaving behind envi-

### Inter Lake editorial

ronmental catastrophes.

In 1998, Montanans said "enough is enough." After all, mining is not new in Montana, and the state has plenty of evidence of the damage that can be done. In fact, cleanup work at the former Kendall Mine, the Zortman-Landusky Mine and the Beal Mountain Mine, all of which used the cyanide-leach technology, could cost the taxpayers as much as \$40 million.

Everyone wants to see good jobs for hard-working Montanans, but we also need to look out for the existing taxpayers of Montana, and make sure they are not paying for the mistakes of out-of-state corporations.

Colorado's Canyon Resources, which operated the Kendall Mine, now wants to develop an open-pit cyanide-leach mine along the Upper Blackfoot River. Reportedly, this pit is a mile wide and 1,200 feet deep, similar in size to the Berkeley Pit in Butte. It's a big deal, and Canyon Resources has a lot invested in it.

That's why the company has spent \$1.3 million so far on the campaign to pass I-147, and why this initiative looks more like an attempt to buy legislation than an honest effort to improve state policy. After all, that's a lot of money — more than either gubernatorial candidate has even raised yet.

By contrast the two main opposition groups have raised about \$160,000, with major donations coming from Montana Trout Unlimited and the Clark Fork Coalition. Talk about David and Goliath!

Montana voters ought to stick by their guns (or slingshots, as the case may be). It wasn't the Legislature that passed the ban on cyanide-leach mining, it was the citizens of Montana. Nothing much has changed in mining technology in the past six years, and there are no guarantees that there would be no contamination from cyanide mining. In addition, the proposed safeguards in I-147 were already being required back in 1998 as part of the mining permit process.

Therefore the voters have no reason to change their mind. Vote no on I-147.